

THE DECEIT AND DESIRE

Film Bible

Format: Feature Film

Genre: Historical Drama / Social Justice Drama

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Logline

When a widowed Edinburgh labourer places his three children in the temporary care of a charitable refuge, he unleashes a devastating chain of deceit that sees them trafficked into Canada under the authority of religious philanthropy, forcing him into a years-long struggle to recover them before they vanish forever.

Short Pitch

The Deceit and Desire is a deeply emotional historical drama about family separation, institutional abuse and the respectable language used to justify cruelty. Framed by testimony at the 2020 Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, it tells the story of Arthur Delaney, a young Irish Catholic father in 1880s Edinburgh who loses his wife, struggles to keep his children afloat, and entrusts them temporarily to the Edinburgh and Leith Children's Aid and Refuge Society — only to discover that the refuge's evangelical leader, Emma Stirling, has removed them to Canada as part of a wider child migration scheme. What follows is a father's legal, spiritual and transatlantic battle against a system determined to rename theft as salvation.

Project Overview

At its heart, *The Deceit and Desire* is about the collision between **parental love and institutional power**. Arthur Delaney is flawed, grieving, poor and sometimes overwhelmed, but he is never indifferent to his children. Emma Stirling and her network, by contrast, claim moral superiority precisely through their ability to reinterpret his hardship as unfitness and his children as material to be improved, relocated and redistributed. That moral inversion gives the film its force.

The film also operates on two time levels. In the past, it is an intimate and sweeping historical drama moving from tenement family life and bereavement into courtrooms, churches, charity offices, farms and transatlantic searches. In the present, it is a story about testimony, family memory and the afterlife of historical abuse, as Patricia Dishon brings Arthur's story into public record before the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry. That frame gives the project not just period sweep, but modern urgency and emotional reach.

Why This Film

The Deceit and Desire offers:

- a clear emotional engine through Arthur's fight for his children
- a strong historical hook in the real-world child migration machinery
- a morally rich antagonist in Emma Stirling
- a courtroom/institutional strand that widens the scope without losing intimacy
- a present-day inquiry frame that gives the story contemporary relevance
- an ending that is bittersweet rather than falsely neat, with memory and lineage carrying what justice could not fully restore

It is a film that can speak to audiences drawn to historical dramas with emotional and social weight, while also resonating strongly in a contemporary climate of institutional reckoning.

Main Characters

Arthur Delaney

Arthur is the emotional spine of the film: a 22-year-old Irish Catholic working man in Edinburgh whose life is shattered by the death of his wife, Mary. He begins the story as warm, humorous, loving and grounded in family, and is then pushed into grief, poverty, drink, shame and desperation. What makes Arthur a strong dramatic lead is that he is neither sainted nor condemned. He fails in recognisable human ways, but those failures never amount to abandonment. His love for his children remains the fixed truth of the story, even when institutions around him refuse to recognise it.

Arthur's arc is not just one of suffering, but of persistence. He rebuilds through work, through faith, through Cecilia's support, and through sheer refusal to surrender his children to the lie that he was never worthy of them. He becomes the moral counterweight to the system: vulnerable, flawed, but human in a way the machinery around him is not.

Emma Stirling

Emma Stirling is one of the script's richest figures because she is not a moustache-twirling villain but a woman of ideological certainty. She genuinely believes in her mission. That is what makes her dangerous. She runs the refuge homes, oversees training farms, negotiates finances and placements, and speaks fluently in the language of God, uplift and duty. But beneath that language lies prejudice, hierarchy and control. She openly disparages Catholicism, treats Arthur's poverty as moral inferiority, and justifies the removal of children as a matter of principle.

Emma's function in the film is larger than one antagonist. She represents the respectable face of structural abuse — the person who can look herself in the mirror and still describe trafficking children as benevolence.

Cecilia

Cecilia is the film's quiet moral and emotional rescuer. She meets Arthur at his lowest point in St Patrick's Church and offers him not romance first, but simple human recognition and a route back into life. She becomes his wife, partner, comfort and witness, and later the person who helps sustain the legal fight. Cecilia is not ornamental support. She embodies compassion without sentimentality and gives the film one of its clearest alternatives to Emma's authoritarian "care."

Cecilia also helps the film avoid a purely masculine suffering narrative. Her faith, practicality and endurance ground Arthur's story in a shared life rather than solitary anguish.

Patricia Dishon

Patricia is the present-day witness whose testimony frames the film. She is not a lead in terms of screen time, but she is crucial structurally and emotionally. Through her, the story is not simply "told"; it is recovered, presented and validated. Patricia represents descendants carrying unfinished history into public record. Her presence gives the film gravitas and a modern point of entry.

Mary Delaney

Mary appears mainly in the opening movement, but she is essential. Her warmth, humour and intimacy with Arthur establish the family life whose destruction drives the entire film. Without Mary, the story risks becoming only about institutional theft. With her, it begins as a domestic tragedy and therefore feels much larger emotionally when the children are lost.

Father Hannan

Father Hannan is one of the community's strongest moral voices. He provides Arthur with spiritual shelter, practical guidance and eventually access to legal representation. He is important not because he is heroic in a dramatic sense, but because he embodies communal responsibility in contrast to institutional hypocrisy. Where Emma Stirling uses religion to authorise control, Father Hannan uses it to support dignity and justice.

Ross Stewart

Arthur's lawyer is the procedural and legal engine of the second half. Stewart provides the blunt truth Arthur needs: the refuge had no right to remove the children without his consent. He is intelligent, composed and increasingly indignant at the evasions of the directors. Stewart helps widen the film beyond domestic tragedy into a courtroom and accountability drama.

Helen Delaney

Arthur's grandmother gives the story generational depth and family continuity. She is one of the few figures able to speak to Arthur with both authority and tenderness, and her scenes help clarify the family's fractures around religion, inheritance and social standing. Helen also represents a kind of memory and rootedness that the child migration scheme violently disrupts.

Miss Guthrie

Guthrie is one of the story's most unsettling figures because she is not openly monstrous. She is the smiling face of the institution, the person who first persuades Arthur to entrust the children to the refuge and frames the offer in practical, benevolent language. She is essential to the title's idea of deceit wrapped inside moral aspiration.

Walter Durham

Walter is the practical operator on the Canadian side of the scheme. He may not possess Emma's ideological force, but he helps translate her plans into logistics — trains, farms, placements, distance. He is important because he shows how systems like this are never sustained by one zealot alone. They require ordinary people willing to look away from what they are participating in.

Grant Cunningham

Grant is the detective-agent who accompanies Arthur to Canada. He brings competence, procedural clarity and some necessary restraint to Arthur's more emotional search. Through him, the transatlantic leg of the story becomes a genuine investigative pursuit rather than just a grief journey.

Supporting Characters of Note

James, Annie and Robina Delaney

The children are not interchangeable victims. James is older, observant and burdened early with trying to understand what is happening. Annie is affectionate and physically frailer. Robina is the youngest and most immediately vulnerable. Their later fates — dispersed across North America and recovered only through inquiry testimony — form the film's final emotional reckoning.

Maggie Clark

Neighbour, helper and one of the story's most moving examples of working-class female solidarity. Arthur's unfair lashing out at Maggie is one of his lowest moments, and their later reconciliation becomes one of the film's quiet moral repairs.

Bernadette Auld / Mr MacDonald / the Directors

These characters help flesh out the charitable board and financial governance around Emma Stirling. Their importance lies in their passivity, caution and late-stage disapproval. They are not cartoon villains, but enablers — exactly the kind of respectable institutional figures who allow abuse to continue by refusing to confront it in time.

Tone

What It Feels Like

The tone is:

- intimate

- sorrowful
- indignant
- humane
- historically textured
- quietly furious beneath its restraint

The film should never feel like heritage drama for its own sake. It is emotionally rich and period-detailed, but it must also feel urgent, immediate and grounded in working-class life. The domestic scenes need warmth and texture so the later losses hurt. The institutional scenes need clarity and control so the violence of bureaucracy becomes visible.

Humour

Humour exists in the opening family scenes, in neighbourly banter, in sibling and community talk, and in Arthur and Mary's intimacy. That is vital because it establishes the life worth mourning. Once the tragedy deepens, the humour should become rarer and more bittersweet, often emerging from resilience rather than lightness.

Visual Language

The film should move between two contrasting visual worlds.

Arthur's world:

- cramped closes and stairwells
- candlelit tenements
- muddy backyards
- smoky pubs
- church interiors
- crowded streets
- bodily grief and domestic texture

Emma's world:

- Georgian offices
- ledgers and orderly desks
- school dormitories
- carriages and train stations
- training farms
- Canadian fields and distribution routes
- respectability weaponised as order

The inquiry frame should be clean, plain and modern — almost austere — allowing the past to feel both distant and painfully present.

Comps

Comparable Films / Lanes

Philomena for institutional betrayal, parent-child separation and long-delayed truth.

The Magdalene Sisters for religiously sanctioned cruelty and the violence of moral institutions.

Brooklyn or **Angela's Ashes**, tonally in fragments, for Irish migration texture and emotional social realism.
Woman in Gold or inquiry-led dramas for the structure of historical recovery through present-day testimony.
Small Things Like These for quiet moral outrage inside respectable religious structures.

Positioning Statement

The Deceit and Desire is a **prestige historical drama about child migration, institutional hypocrisy and a father's fight against a system that calls theft salvation.**

World of the Film

Edinburgh, 1880s

The story begins in a dense, sectarian, economically strained Edinburgh where Irish Catholic families are living close to the edge and old religious divisions shape opportunity, status and belonging. The Royal Mile, Gray's Close, St Patrick's, pawn shops, pubs and crowded tenements all matter because they create a social world that feels lived-in rather than illustrated.

The Refuge and Its Machinery

Mackenzie Place, Leadburn Farm, boardrooms, ledgers and the correspondence around the charity form the institutional world of the film. This is where benevolence becomes administration and administration becomes coercion. The adults in these rooms rarely raise their voices, which makes what they authorise even more chilling.

Canada / Nova Scotia / Quebec

Once the story crosses the Atlantic, the world opens geographically but becomes harsher morally. Hillfoot Farm, train lines, Aylesford, remote placements, cabins and domestic-service destinations reveal a colonial landscape that sees children as labour to be absorbed and dispersed. The distances themselves become part of the violence. Canada is not just another setting. It is the mechanism by which recovery becomes almost impossible.

The Inquiry Frame

The 2020 Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry provides a modern, stripped-back counterworld to the period narrative. It is the place where documents, memory and descendants finally confront the record. This frame should feel precise and understated, letting the emotional weight come from testimony rather than melodrama.

Thematic Positioning

Benevolence as Cover for Control

The title speaks directly to the story's central contradiction: the desire to "save" children becomes the language through which they are stolen, exported and repurposed. Emma Stirling and her institutions do not see themselves as villains. That is precisely why the film is powerful. It shows how cruelty often arrives dressed as duty.

Poverty Misread as Unfitness

Arthur's central tragedy is that his grief and hardship are interpreted not as conditions requiring support, but as evidence that he has forfeited his parental rights. The story is therefore not only about one father's loss, but about the way institutions criminalise poverty while congratulating themselves for intervening.

Sectarianism and Moral Hierarchy

Emma's explicit anti-Catholicism is not incidental. It is part of the ideological scaffolding that allows her to view Arthur's family as more removable, more corrigible, more in need of Protestant order. The film shows how religious prejudice can be folded seamlessly into philanthropic self-regard.

Parenthood Against Institution

The emotional argument of the film is simple and strong: Arthur may be broken, but he is their father. The story derives much of its force from the gap between that truth and the way law, charity and empire repeatedly obscure it. The fight for the children is therefore both literal and symbolic — a fight to insist that poor people still belong to their own families.

Memory as Resistance

The inquiry ending matters because it denies the system the final word. Annie, Robina and James were dispersed, but not erased. James naming his children after his sister and father becomes one of the film's most moving forms of resistance: family memory survived the machinery designed to sever it.

Future-Facing Positioning

The Deceit and Desire works strongly as a **self-contained prestige feature**, with a complete emotional and thematic arc. Arthur's domestic tragedy, legal struggle and Canadian search form a fully satisfying dramatic spine, while the inquiry frame delivers the long-view emotional resolution. The film does not require a sequel to feel complete.

That said, it has strong value in a broader marketplace conversation for two reasons.

First, it has clear **awards and prestige-drama positioning**. The combination of historical wrongdoing, institutional reckoning, emotionally rich roles, and contemporary inquiry framing makes it attractive as a serious literary film with social relevance.

Second, it has strong **anthology-adjacent potential**. Not as a direct sequel, but as part of a wider body of historical dramas about hidden Scottish or British injustices uncovered across generations. In that sense, the inquiry frame is especially useful: it suggests a model in which forgotten cases, families and institutional abuses could each anchor their own standalone features or limited series.

The cleanest way to position it is:

- as a powerful standalone feature
- with the optional possibility of sitting within a broader slate of historically grounded justice dramas

That keeps the film focused while preserving its wider strategic value.

Closing Statement

The Deceit and Desire is a historical drama of unusual emotional force because it never loses sight of the human scale inside institutional crime. It begins with a family, expands into a system, crosses an ocean, and ends in testimony — carrying one father's grief into public record across generations. It is a story about how children were taken, how parents were dismissed, and how respectability can become the perfect camouflage for abuse. Most importantly, it is a story that insists memory, however delayed, can still confront the official lies that once passed for charity.